

Lent, 2016: “Cross My Heart, Cont’d” (w/ The 5 Love Languages)
The Gift of Tangible Connection: “Physical Touch”
Sermon on Luke 7:36-48, theme Scripture: Galatians 5:13-18, 22-25
Pastor Jenny Hallenbeck Orr

I love so very, very many things about Jesus. Technically, I love *everything* about Jesus...but, let's be honest, there are some things about him that are a bit harder to love than others. Like the things he said that challenge my ideas and my behavior:

For example, Jesus telling us to love our enemies and to pray for those who treat us badly isn't as easy to love as his miraculous healings or his kindness to children. But it's all part of who Jesus is...so I even begrudgingly love the ways he challenges us.

Today's reading from Luke chapter 7, however, demonstrates two of the things I love most about him – two things that, for me, are easy to love: the first is the way Jesus welcomes sinners and outcasts...and the second is the way he can tell a story that puts snotty, religious people in their place. Those two things are the essence of this reading from Luke 7.

To recap, Jesus was invited for dinner at a religious leader's home...a “sinful,” outcast woman joined the party and offered Jesus some pretty extravagant love by washing his feet with her tears, drying them with her hair, and then kissing his feet and pouring expensive perfume on them.

The religious leader scoffed at Jesus for letting the woman touch him. In response, Jesus told a story about debt, forgiveness, and the gift of abundant mercy...Jesus then gave a point-by-point analysis of how the “sinful” woman had treated him better than the religious leader had...and, finally, Jesus offered the woman the assurance of what she had already learned from him: that her sins were, in fact, forgiven.

Luke doesn't tell us what exactly happened next, but my guess is there was some awkward silence and that Jesus left the party a bit later, leaving the religious leader to stew in his own, judgmental juices.

Hopefully, that religious leader took the opportunity to let God change his mind and heart. Hopefully, he grew in his ability to love others well. See, if we allow him to, Jesus, can change *all* of our minds and hearts when we are trapped in judgment and when we are limited in our capacity to show love to those around us.

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About a month ago, my husband, Derrick, and I attended a clergy and clergy spouse retreat that was led by our Dakotas bishop, Bruce Ough. During the retreat, Bishop Ough spoke about a story in the Gospel of Mark that mirrors today's story from Luke. After he spoke about the story, he invited us to think and talk together about our own initial, gut reactions to the “sinful” woman's behavior toward Jesus.

Reactions around the room were mixed, but many of us found the woman's behavior to be strange and a bit off-putting – especially around here where we tend to be rather reserved when it comes to physical affection in mixed company.

Granted, in Jesus' time, and in that cultural setting, it was fully acceptable to have someone wash your feet as an act of hospitality and service when they welcomed you into their home.

But to have them *kiss* your feet? And to cry all over you, *drying* your feet with their hair – not to mention pouring expensive perfume onto your feet? That was *not* so normal and acceptable. This “sinful” woman was showing her love for Jesus in a very extravagant, very *physical* way.

For many of us midwesterners, such extravagant, physical expressions of love seem strange...especially when the two people engaged in said expressions of love were not the least bit romantically involved.

But there's no denying that many among us best *receive* – and best *give* – love in physical ways. And, in doing so, we are expressing love through the gift of tangible connection. Today's story from Luke chapter 7 beautifully demonstrates the love language getting this week's focus: the love language “Physical Touch.”

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This weekend marks the 3rd weekend in the 40-day church season of Lent. During Lent, Christians focus on God's great love for us in Jesus Christ – love that was most poignantly demonstrated in Jesus' sacrificial death on the cross. Our 40-day Lenten journey is a journey to the cross of Good Friday and the empty tomb of Easter Sunday.

During Lent, we reflect on the human sin, judgment, and fear that led to Jesus' death on the cross. We spend the season seeking to grow beyond our sin and seeking to deepen our relationship with God and others.

Here at McCabe, we are looking at Lent through the lens of *The 5 Love Languages*. In using this particular lens, it is my hope that we'll be reminded of God's great love for us in Jesus Christ...and that we'll respond to that holy love by growing in our ability to love others *well*.

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The 5 Love Languages were developed as a concept by Christian counselor Dr. Gary Chapman.

Think about the languages with which we communicate: English, Spanish, German, sign language, etc.

If someone communicates with us in a language we do not speak, it's very difficult for us to understand them...and vice versa. According to Gary Chapman, the same principle applies when it comes to communicating *love* in any relationship.

Through his marriage and family counseling practice, Dr. Chapman discovered that, while there are thousands of languages heard and spoken throughout the world, there are 5 primary “languages” through which we communicate *love*.

Those five “love languages” are as follows: *Words of Affirmation. Quality Time. Physical Touch. Gifts. And Acts of Service.* Whether we realize it or not, each of us receives and offers love in these five ways – and one or two of them tend to be the ways in which we receive and offer love *best* and most *naturally*. //

It's worth noting these are love languages with which we communicate in *all* of our relationships: romantic, friendship, familial, collegial, you name it. No matter the relationship, love will somehow be communicated in these five ways.

The challenge lies in knowing how *best* to communicate love with those around us. Because, just like spoken languages, if someone communicates *love* to us in a “love language” that is not one of our primary love languages, we may not understand it as love...and vice versa.

If we intend to communicate love, affection, and care to someone in our life, we should want to communicate that love in the best way possible. Sometimes this will mean learning to “speak” a love language that may not be one of our own top love languages...and that isn't easy.

A colleague of mine in another part of the country recently shared with me that, even when she has been brave enough to tell people her primary love language, it rarely makes a difference in how people “speak” love to her. That made me sad! It's not easy to learn to speak a love language that isn't our primary love language, but it's so necessary if we want to communicate love *well* to those who are dear to us.

As Gary Chapman wrote in one of his books about the 5 love languages, “The purpose of love is to enhance the well-being of another, not to satisfy your own desires. Therefore, learning to speak another person's primary love language is the most effective way of loving others.”¹

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¹ *The Five Love Languages: Singles Edition.* Gary Chapman. 103.

The first week of this series, we considered Words of Affirmation. If Words of Affirmation is one of your top love languages, kind, supportive, affirming words *feel* like love to you.

Last week, we looked at Quality Time. If Quality Time is a top love language for you, you crave the undivided attention of others: knowing someone is focused and attentive to you *feels* like love.

This week, and in conjunction with today's story from Luke chapter 7, we're focusing on the love language "Physical Touch." And, just as I've said with the other love languages we've explored, Physical Touch is a love language with which we communicate in *any* relationship – not just in romantic relationships.

But...before I continue with more about this particular love language, I'd like to read you a section of a book I'm reading by social work researcher and presenter, Dr. Brené Brown.

The book is called *Daring Greatly: How the Courage to Be Vulnerable Transforms the Way We Live, Love, Parent, and Lead*. Being vulnerable is about putting your heart out there...trusting that others will handle your heart with care, while knowing they might reject or mistreat it. As I've been reading this book, I've encountered so much in it that connects to the idea of loving others well...because loving others well – and allowing others to love *us* well – certainly takes courage and vulnerability.

In fact, a section of Brené Brown's book *Daring Greatly* is what inspired me to place clear-glass containers of gemstones on the altar tables in our McCabe worship spaces. Perhaps you've noticed them and wondered if they were more than mere decoration. Well, they are! //

In *Daring Greatly*, Dr. Brown tells a story about something that happened when her daughter, Ellen, was in third grade...and that story is the reason for the containers of gemstones on our sanctuary and Great Hall altar tables. She tells the story so well in the book that I'm simply going to read it to you. Brené Brown wrote this:

"During recess, [my daughter Ellen] had confided in a friend from her class about a funny, slightly embarrassing thing that had happened to her earlier in the day. By lunchtime, all of the girls in her peer group knew her secret and were giving her a hard time ...

"When she came home, she burst into tears and told me that she was never going to tell anyone anything again ... To make matters worse, Ellen told me that the girls were still laughing at her when they returned to the classroom [after lunch], so much so that her teacher separated them and took some marbles out of the marble jar.

“Ellen's teacher had a large, clear glass vase that she and the kids referred to as 'the marble jar.' She kept a bag of colored marbles next to the jar, and whenever the class was collectively making good choices, she would throw some marbles *into* the jar. Whenever the class was acting out, breaking rules, or not listening, the teacher would take marbles *out of* the jar. If and when the marbles made it to the top of the jar, the students would be rewarded with a celebration party ...

Dr. Brown continues with, “I told Ellen to think about her friendships as marble jars. Whenever someone supports you, or is kind to you, or sticks up for you, or honors what you share with them as private, you put marbles in [their] jar. When people are mean, or disrespectful, or share your secrets, marbles come out. When I asked her if it made sense, she nodded her head with excitement and said, 'I've got marble jar friends!' ...

“[She then] described four friends whom she could always count on, who knew some of her secrets and would never tell, and who told her some of their secrets too. She said, 'These are the friends who ask me to sit with them, even if they've been asked to sit at the popular kids' table.’”² //

As I read this section of *Daring Greatly*, I thought, “What a perfect metaphor for love!” So, they aren't quite marbles, but this is the idea behind the containers of gemstones on the altar table.

Our hearts, minds, and spirits are like the glass containers: God created us to be filled with love...and we best experience that love through healthy, meaningful human connection. The gemstones in the container symbolize the love we receive from others – and, of course, there is the potential for love to be added *or* subtracted.

When people “speak” to us in the love languages we best understand, it's like they're adding marbles to our jar. And, likewise, when we “speak” to others in the love languages *they* best understand, we are adding marbles to their jar.

This is how so many of us experience not only *human* love for us, but also how we experience *God's* love for us. God loves us uniquely and completely, so God puts people into our lives who will love us in the ways that *feel* most like love to us. And, in turn, we are challenged to *share* love with others in the ways that feel most like love to them.

This remains true no matter the love language. Today our focus is Physical Touch... and this love language about making a *tangible connection* with someone you care about: a reassuring arm squeeze... sitting close while watching TV...a warm hug of greeting or goodbye...a gentle shoulder punch as you congratulate someone...a welcoming handshake during greeting time in worship...a neck or back rub...

² *Daring Greatly* by Brené Brown. 47-48.

holding hands with a child or romantic partner.

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All that in mind, it's worth noting that this love language in particular has the potential to be used painfully or abusively. Few things are more violating or hurtful than physical touch done with force, done in anger, or done without the permission of the recipient.

When Physical Touch is used painfully, abusively, or without the permission of the recipient, the marbles will drain right out of someone's metaphorical marble jar.

This is why I always appreciate folks who bother to ask others if they appreciate hugs: because, as innocent, and as genuinely loving as hugs can be, not everyone is a hugger! It's considerate to ask permission if you're not sure. No one knows the reality of this better than someone who has been on the receiving end of a hug that was *not* welcome, not innocent, and that was not genuinely loving.

That said, for many people, Physical Touch is the best way they receive or give love. And I have a feeling that may have been the case for the “sinful” woman in today's story from Luke 7.

The woman was exceedingly grateful to Jesus for his willingness to welcome her and to offer her forgiveness...and she expressed her gratitude in a very physical way: by washing his feet with her tears, by drying his feet with her hair, by kissing his feet, and by anointing them with expensive perfume.

This display of love through Physical Touch may seem excessive or awkward to some of us...but, based on the way Luke tells the story, Jesus received the woman's act in exactly the way she intended it: as an act of sincere love and gratitude.

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When Jesus was born into this world the first Christmas 2,000 years ago, God's very self – God's very heart – began walking around among us.

Jesus Christ was God's way of expressing love through the language of “Physical Touch”. Because Jesus *is* God's tangible presence among us. Jesus is the God we can see and hear and touch. Jesus is God's way of telling us that the *physical matters*. //

This season of Lent, as we get closer to the cross of Good Friday, we are reminded that, in Jesus, God *physically* experienced so much of what life on this earth can bring – the blessings and the woes.

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So, as we walk ever closer to the cross of Good Friday, may we grow in our love for our loving God – the God who sent Jesus to be our Savior...to be God's tangible,

physical presence with us. And may we respond to God's great love by growing in the way we share love in this world.

Let us pray...

Almighty God, thank you for loving us so much. Thank you for sending Jesus to be your physical presence among us. Where physical touch is needed in this world to bring others blessing, assurance, or healing, may we offer it. And, by our love for others, may the world come to know of our love for you; in Jesus' name we pray. Amen.